

None Too Much.. None Too Short
2 Cor. 8:1-5, 7-10, 13-15; 9:6-7, 12

"..here..is the news of the grace of God which was given in the churches in Macedonia; and of how throughout great trials by suffering, their constant cheerfulness and their intense poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity. I can swear that they gave not only as much as they could afford, but far more, and quite spontaneously, begging us for the favour of sharing in this service and, what was quite unexpected, they offered their own selves first to God, and under God, to us. (8:1-5)

"You always have the most of everything...so we expect you to put the most into this work of mercy too [the collection for Jerusalem]... Remember how generous the Lord Jesus was: he was rich, but he became poor for your sake.. I am only making a suggestion... This does not mean that to give relief to others you ought to make things difficult for yourselves: it is a question of balancing what happens to be your surplus now against their present need, and one day they may have something to spare that will supply your need... As scripture says, 'The man who gathered much had none too much, the man who gathered little did not go short'. (8:7-10, 13-15)

"Thin sowing means thin reaping; the more you sow, the more you reap. Each one should give what he has decided in his own mind, not grudgingly or because he is made to, for 'God loves a cheerful giver'... Doing this holy service is not only supplying all the needs of the saints but it also increases the amount of thanksgiving that God receives..." (9:6-7, 12)

It is a good thing to have a regular time every year to remind ourselves that giving is a part of worship, "increasing the amount of thanksgiving to God", as Paul says. And it is a good thing to be regularly reminded that faithful stewardship of what we have is an essential part of Christian obedience to the Great Commandment: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God.; and thy neighbor as thyself."

In the Jewish tradition, that regular reminder comes about the middle of February, at the end of the feast of Purim. It is then that the people celebrate their ancient deliverance from a Persian massacre in the time of Esther. It is a celebration--but the celebrations close with a reminder from the rabbis that "celebration is not enough. Now go out and find people poorer than

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yourselves, and give them gifts". (Barclay).

For Paul, the time for reminder came when he was writing his second letter to Corinth. Quite suddenly he interrupts what he was writing in order to promote what in today's uninspired prose we would call a "Jerusalem Fund Drive", but what he called "a collection for the saints". "Here's some news from Macedonia", he says. "They remembered how rich the Lord Jesus was, and how he gave it all up for us to become poor, and even to die for them. Then those Macedonians, who were poor and persecuted themselves, actually begged us to let them send an offering to the church in Jerusalem, which was going through a very hard time.". Then Paul stopped again, thinking perhaps he was making too hard a sell, and added, "I'm only making a suggestion.. I don't want you to rob yourselves of what you really need. It's a matter of balance. Think of what little surplus you might have, and remember they have not surplus at all. They are in desperate trouble."

There's an Old Testament example: the feast of Purim, in February. And a New Testament example: the collection for Jerusalem 2000 years ago. But the time for reminder in this community is now, for this is Stewardship Month.

It should not be too hard in Stamford to make a case for what calls "the scriptural balance"--"none too much... and none too little". And it should not be difficult for you and Stamford and me in Princeton to find people "poorer than ourselves". But perhaps we do need reminders.

I don't suppose that many here really feel very rich, at least not too rich. Few people ever do. But I grew up as an American in Asia, and there was no way I could pass myself off as poor there. We had mud walls, but a tile roof and running water. So though others will tell you this week about poverty in America (and I know very well that there is poverty here), let my reminder today be about still more desperate needs in other parts of the world, needs sometimes forgotten because they are so far away.

This is a time for reminding ourselves about countries so poor that their average national production per person is sometimes

only \$60 a year, and never more than \$100--a year, not a week, as in Bhutan, or Laos. That compares to more than \$14,000 a year for every man, woman and child in this country. More than half of the people in the world live in Asian countries where the average is less than \$250 a year.

And where there is poverty there is always hunger. They go hand in hand like a double curse. We in America produce more food than we can eat; but in the third world, "at any given moment", according to one international report, "10 million young children are in the grip of severe (protein) energy malnutrition." You see them every night these days in the excruciatingly painful pictures of refugee camps of Ruanda on the Zaire border in Africe. Half the childre under 5 years of age in the 3rd world are killed by malnutrition or some hunger-related diseases every year. (Asia 1981 Yrbk). A few years ago (1982) it was still true that:

Out of 10 babies born in Asia, 15 would died within a year. Of the 85 who survive: 75 will have no access to modern medical care in childhood.

--25 will be undernourished during the crucial weaning age, which means their chances of dying is 30 to 45 higher than here in North America.

--only 6 out of 10 who live to school age will ever see the inside of a classroom.

-- And only 4 of these 6 will complete elementary school.

Where is the Christian balance, where is the human fairness balance, of which Paul reminds the Corinthians: "None too much..none too little." And through them he tells us, "You have the most of everything. So we expect you to put the most into works of mercy."

But there is more to Christian works of mercy than feeding, and healing, or even educating. Eileen and I did a lot of all three as your missionaries in Korea. We distributed relief food in an area recovering from a famine. And how much the people appreciated it. My brother was a medical missionary, using his medical center in the city to open smaller hospitals and send medical teams to clinics all over the province in which he was working. I was an educational missionary, a seminary professor with responsibilities in two universities. We fed, we healed, we taught. And the Koreans appreciated all of it. But that is not

what they were most grateful for. As some put it, after the communist invasion, "The communists feed and heal, but you Christians are different." The communists feed and heal only those who obey them. You Christians feed your enemies. The latest program of Korea's Christians is what they call the "Love Rice" campaign. The literal translation doesn't quite fit. It doesn't mean "Love the rice"; it means giving rice as a gift of love to the communists in North Korea, the very communists who killed so many of their own families in the days of communist persecution. They heard that the South Korean was about to use the big Korean rice surplus in the south for making and marketing "rice wine". They went to the government. "We'll buy the surplus," they said. "What for?" said the government. "We'll buy it and package it, and ship it free, not just to North Korea, but to as many of the world's suffering hunger zones as we can reach." It was Korea's "collection for Jerusalem".

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But in the end, the call to stewardship comes to each Christian individually. The story of one woman tell it all. She was one of the thousands of refugees who escaped from the communists in the north. Like the others, she had lost everything. To keep alive she picked up pieces of paper and cloth from the streets, smoothed and washed and ironed them, and sold them for a few pennies. Working from early morning to late at night she began to improve her stock. She bought and sold other things, and dreamed of the day when she might be able to move out of her refugee shack of cardboard walls and a roof of tin beer cans thrown away by the Americans which she flattened out to keep off the rain or snow. She dreamed of a real home, when she would be a refugee no more. Saving every penny, she finally had enough and the home she built made her very, very proud. No beer cans for her roof, but tiles, real tiles. So she gathered her things together and prepared to move out from under the beer cans into her new home. But that was the day that the elders of the Church of Everlasting Joy, Presbyterian, chose to call on her on behalf of the church building fund. She was distressed and embarrassed. "I've everything into my new home," she told them. "I have nothing